

# STRENGTHENING THE PROVISION OF CARE AND SUPPORT TO VULNERABLE CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

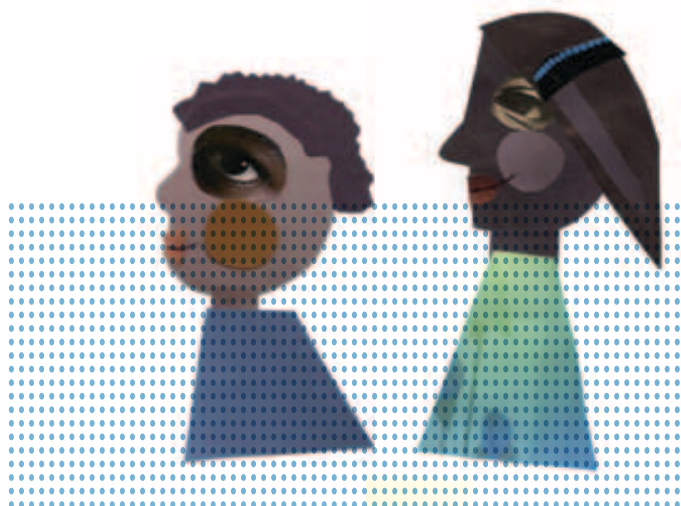
Caring Schools Programme, October 2006 – September 2012

## BACKGROUND

The Caring Schools Programme was piloted in 2005 by the Nelson Mandela Children Foundation, in a context in which the provision of care and support to vulnerable children was increasingly being recognised as a core function of schools in South Africa. In 2005, 76% of South Africa's children were living in poverty; 13% of children aged 2-14 years had already lost one or both parents; and 5.7 million children were predicted to be orphaned by 2015, mostly due to HIV and AIDS.<sup>1</sup> Poverty, abuse, neglect, separation from parents, domestic violence, poor or no access to basic services, and alcohol and substance abuse, are some of the many enduring factors that make children vulnerable, and can constitute a barrier to realising their right to a quality education and their academic potential.

In response to this situation, the Department of Basic Education (DBE)'s White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education (2001) recommended the introduction of School Based Support Teams, comprising one coordinator and other teachers in charge of promoting care and support at school level to address barriers to learning and promote inclusion. However, members of School Based Support Teams are often unable to provide adequate care and support to vulnerable learners due to high workloads. The Caring Schools model piloted in the Free State was born out of the need to support School Based Support Teams to implement the White Paper 6 recommendations. Five non-governmental organisations, 25 schools and the Department of Basic Education started to work together to develop a model of sustainable care for vulnerable children, with Save the Children taking responsibility for 5 schools in Thabo Mofutsanyana district.

In addition to working on care and support at school level, Save the Children has hosted the Caring Schools Network (CASNET) since 2005. CASNET as depicted by the graphic representation below is a platform that brings together more than 100 NGOs and other civil society organisations, donor



agencies, academic/research institutions and government departments in nine provinces to share information, build capacity and promote a culture of care in South African schools.

## APPROACH

The principal objective of the Caring Schools Programme is to increase the capacity of schools to provide care and support to vulnerable children. In order to achieve this objective, the Programme has five key components that are expected to be instituted in every school: (1) Physical attractiveness, (2) Social and emotional support, (3) Supporting the development of skills for children, (4) Use of schools as a centre for delivery of other governmental child services, and (5) Linking schools with community programmes.

After identifying local municipalities and target schools, principals are approached by Save the Children, in partnership with the district level Department of Basic Education, to apply for participation for a period of two years in the Programme. Schools are requested to apply rather than hand-picked and must meet certain criteria in order to be considered. They must have a functioning School Based Support Team (SBST) and School Governing Body (SGB). The school management must demonstrate commitment to achieving the Programme's objectives. Finally the school must be willing to actively participate in a local "Network of Care" comprised of key Government and civil society roleplayers. The exact make up of the Networks of Care may vary but most often include the Departments of Basic Education, Social Development, Health, Agriculture and Home Affairs, the South African Police Services, non-governmental, faith-based and other community-



*Example  
of Caring  
Schools in  
the Free State*

1. Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2007. Caring Schools Dialogue, pp.8-9.

based organisations. Networks of Care exist to improve the co-ordination of services to children and strengthen the referral systems between participating organisations at the local level.

The Programme is implemented in participating schools primarily through the School Based Support Teams, ensuring school community ownership. Each Caring School has two Youth Facilitators (YFs) – ideally one male and one female between the ages of 18 and 28 – whose stipend are sponsored by Save the Children. Youth Facilitators are responsible for identifying vulnerable children and referring them to the School Based Support Teams. Youth Facilitators also support the establishment and activities of Children's Committees, groups of around 20 children dedicated to supporting vulnerable peers and to ensuring that children's opinions and concerns influence the implementation of the Programme.

Since 2010 Save the Children has used a cluster approach, enabling effective sharing of best practice, experience and physical and human resources across participating schools. The cluster approach also strengthens Networks of Care, allowing duty bearers such as social workers and nurses to address common issues raised by schools more efficiently and effectively.

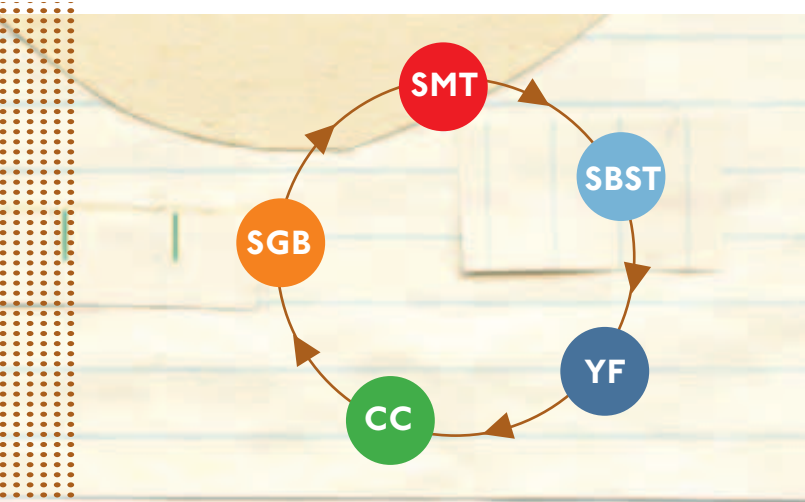


Figure 1: The Caring Schools Model

#### LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK:

The Caring Schools Model is based on the principles laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); the African Union Charter on the Rights and Well Being of the African Child; the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution; the Department of Basic Education's White Paper 6; and the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) policy. The formal structures involved in delivery of the Caring Schools model are: School Management Teams, School Based Support Teams, School Governing Bodies, Youth Facilitators and Children's Committees (see Figure 1).

## COVERAGE

By 2012 the Save the Children Caring Schools Project had reached a total of 200 schools in 3 districts in the Free State including Thabo Mofutsanyana, Fezile Dabi and Motheo.

The Caring Schools Network (which is the umbrella advocacy body bringing together the voices and concerns of the various caring schools) has impacted indirectly 780,000 school going vulnerable children nationwide, from an estimated enrolment of nearly 4 million.

## SUCCESSES

- Through the establishment of Caring School and Networks of Care, the Programme has built the capacity of schools to sustainably link with responsible stakeholders in referral and response. A total of 80,000 children were supported annually by Save the Children to access essential services. Comparison of baseline and endline data supports this, showing that schools have expanded their links with service providers; more schools have access to support for neglected learners; and extracurricular activity programmes have expanded substantially.

*"We have helped the learners to unfold and nurture their skills and talents. There is also now a spirit of togetherness whereby we are all helping each other – the spirit of ubuntu."*<sup>2</sup>

(SBST member)

- Children's Committees have helped to ensure meaningful participation and promote ownership of the Programme, as well as bringing issues such as child abuse, neglect and lack of food at home to the attention of school communities. Through regular consultation with duty bearers, the Committees have contributed to an increase in accountability within the Networks of Care.
- The model's inclusion of out-of-school young people as Youth Facilitators for referral to essential services and psychosocial support enabled its successful advocacy to the National Youth Development Agency in 2011. The National Youth Development Agency subsequently piloted a similar programme in 40 schools in the Free State with the youth they had trained on child and youth care work with technical support from Save the Children. Subsequent to the initial 2 year period of financial support from Save the Children some schools took over the payment of stipends to Youth Facilitators, indicative that schools recognised the important role they are playing in caring for vulnerable learners.





*“They discover things that the SBST can’t. One learner who we thought had parents they found didn’t. The parents were absent. They are in the homes. They see what is going on” (SBST Coordinator speaking about the role of Youth Facilitators)<sup>3</sup>*

- To date, a total of 105 Youth Facilitators have qualified in Child and Youth Care Work following an accredited training course provided by Save the Children. In terms of career-pathing, four Youth Facilitators are now Assistant Teachers; four are working full-time for Save the Children; 10 are enrolled in higher education and others have used the self-confidence they gained as Youth Facilitators to find employment elsewhere.
- The Caring Schools Programme has strengthened the role of the School Based Support Teams in participating schools to the extent that SBST Coordinators are now mentoring neighbouring schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that cross-learning between Caring Schools and other Save the Children programmes has also led to the adoption of the “categorisation approach” used by Child Care Forums, allowing Youth Facilitators to provide appropriate care and support to children based on the degree of vulnerability.
- A survey of the Caring Schools Network (CASNET) members conducted in 2009 found that two of the most important perceived benefits of the network were: (1) Fostering partnership and (2) Generating knowledge



*Example of Caring Schools in the Free State*

among members.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, CASNET routinely participates in high level policy discourse and is recognised as a strong voice in national advocacy on child friendly, inclusive and relevant education for vulnerable children in South Africa. In 2009, for example, CASNET was invited by the national government to act as a formal reference group on the implementation of a strategy in the new National Action Plan for Orphaned and Other Children Made Vulnerable by HIV/AIDS (2009-2012). Through CASNET and other platforms, civil society organisations have also been able to influence the shape and content of the DBE’s Care and Support for Teaching and Learning framework.

2. InsideOut, 2010. Caring Schools Programme and CASNET Evaluation, 2009/2010.
3. HSRC, 2007. A Documentation of the Caring Schools Project (Free State): Key Learnings and Future Directions.
4. InsideOut, 2010.

## CHALLENGES

Challenges experienced include the complexity of issues relating to the abuse and neglect of children who lack appropriate care. The material needs of children living in poverty and the psychosocial support required to assist children infected and affected by HIV and Aids are often beyond the realm of School principals, teachers and Youth Facilitators who may not be equipped to deal with social issues. According to one Youth Facilitator: *"...there was a young person in the community who committed suicide and I didn't know how to explain it to the students when they asked me about it"*. Another said that in response to children's issues *"I just use the Bible, I don't know how else"*<sup>5</sup>

The question of leadership, and in particular the tendency during the early stages of the Programme for schools to depend on Save the Children for proper provision of care and support to vulnerable children has been another challenge.

5. HSRC 2007.



## LESSONS LEARNT

Whilst the success of Caring Schools initially depended on the commitment of individual school principals and School Based Support Team Coordinators, the Programme addressed this through broader consultation with school structures and communities. The whole school (beyond just the principals and SBST co-ordinators) were inducted and given an overview of what a caring school is and stories were shared from caring schools that had already been established. A key lesson learnt was that it is essential to bring provincial and district Department of Basic Education officials on board right from the start with the planning phase and to involve them in developing an implementation plan with the schools. Evaluations of the Programme also pointed to the need to develop exit and sustainability strategies and communicate these to schools from the outset. As part of this, we have increasingly recognised the importance of involving duty bearers and community leaders who show interest in supporting Caring Schools activities as early as possible.

## NEXT STEPS

Save the Children has been working closely with Networks of Care and Youth Facilitators to ensure the sustainability of the Caring Schools Programme. For example:

- We are assisting Youth Facilitators to establish and register Non-Profit Organisations with the Department for Social Development.
- We are supporting Cluster Coordinators from participating schools in their dialogue with the the Department of Basic Education to determine how best to use Networks of Care as structures for driving the Quality Teaching and Learning Campaign.
- The Caring Schools Network (CASNET)'s Free State Chapter is now taking on a leadership role in coordinating the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning programme for the province.

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